

N-AERUS SEMINAR Paris, May 2003

Report on Round Table Friday May 16, 15.00 - 17.00

[Theme: What alternative approaches are emerging from European research, especially those taken with southern partners?

Panel participants: Jean Francois Tribillon, Marie Huchzermeyer, Wilbard J. Kombe, Amitabh Kundu, Alan Gilbert, Paul Jenkins, Marc Gosse, Benedict Phillips

Panel presentations and contributions from the audience focused on the following themes:

The role of research and North-South research co-operation

Researchers and teaching

Diffusion of research findings

Research priorities

The role of research and North-South research co-operation

Several participants pointed to the unique character of research as an activity where critical and autonomous thinking is not only valued but systematised. It thus has great potential for the development of alternative models. Others warned that the innovative potential of research is in reality rather limited, and that what is needed is not more research but more reflection on what we already know. Some types of research, such as policy research, do not even aspire to change paradigms. Several speakers stressed the need for more North-South research co-operation, both institutionalised and between individuals, and exchange of students. Diversity of approaches and sharing of experiences will further innovation. In many universities in the South, there is little room for autonomous criticism. Co-operation with researchers in the North can serve to legitimise the critical function of research. It was pointed out how co-operation involving Ph.D students from the South is mutually beneficial since it exposes supervisors to realities in the south while Ph.D candidates gain increased credibility and get exposed to effective diffusion of their work. If foreigners want to do action research, partnership with local researchers is a necessary condition.

Researchers and teaching

Research involves both data collection, analysis, discovery and diffusion. Several speakers recommended that those of us who also are teachers should be more active in sharing our own research with students, not only research findings, but also the processes involved in doing research.

Diffusion of research findings

Several speakers stressed the need for using research based knowledge in retraining of practitioners, and to bring research into textbooks. A lot of so-called conventional wisdom on development is counter-factual, and it is the responsibility of researchers to point that out. It was also mentioned by several participants that we need to be more focused in our presentation of research findings, and become better communicators. The necessity to reach out to activists in new social movements was mentioned by several speakers.

Research priorities

There seemed to be a fairly general consensus that both large-scale comparative projects and small-scale action projects are needed. A proposal that we put a 1 - 5 year moratorium on new research and concentrate instead on what we can learn from the past gained little support. Studies of the relevance of the “tools” currently in use to bring about development were pointed out as needed. One area of research was particularly mentioned; studies of the impact of neo-liberal policies on urban social relations, on poverty reduction, on increasing disparities in cities, on changes in urban structure and morphology, on erosion of planning capacity, on service provision and urban governance.